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AUTHOR Capps, Douglas
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ABSTRACT

To clarify the relevance of Russian psychologist, literary critic, philologist, and educational theorist Lev S. Vygotsky's research to composition theory necessitates an examination of his account of the development of inner and oral speech. Vygotsky argued that the acquisition and development of oral speech is due to its function: it is primarily a means of social contact that develops to serve real and immediate needs. Oral speech continues to develop because the motivation for its use remains. By contrast to the unconscious development of oral speech, written language skills require formal training, concentration, and effort. Although children possess a substantial vocabulary and basic knowledge of grammatical structures, they have difficulty with written speech because it requires mastery of technical skills unrelated to oral skills. Vygotsky considers writing to be a difficult skill to acquire because it requires: (1) unique technical elements; (2) abstract thought; (3) deliberate and conscious effort; (4) a more complete linguistic structure than inner and oral speech; and (5) a syntax opposite that of inner speech on which its production depends. The contemporary focus on writing processes downplays the issue of meaning. Until meaningful forms of social written communication are widely entrenched, educators must strive to approximate a nurturing environment for the act of writing. (SG)

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Douglas Capps
University of San Diego
Alcala Park
San Diego, CA 92110

CCCC
Boston, Mass.
March 1991

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Douglas Capps
University of San Diego
Alcala Park
San Diego, CA 92110

CCCC
Boston, Mass.
March 1991

Revisioning Vygotsky

Lev S. Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a prominent Russian psychologist, literary critic, philologist, and educational theorist. In his works Thought and Language and Mind in Society Vygotsky presents many of his conclusions on the subject of cognitive development. His investigations focus on the early years of childhood when thought and language first begin to unite. Of Vygotsky's findings, two in particular seem valuable to our understanding of the development of writing skills. The first is Vygotsky's conclusion that "written speech is a separate linguistic function differing from oral speech in both structure and mode of functioning. Even its minimal development requires a high level of abstraction" (Vygotsky, Thought 98). The second is Vygotsky's contention that "unlike the teaching of the spoken language, into which children grow of their own accord, teaching of written language is based on artificial training" (Mind 105). Vygotsky's findings contribute to our understanding of the act of writing, primarily because they reveal that motivation is the most important element in the growth of language skills.

To clarify the relevance of Vygotsky's research to composition theory necessitates an examination of his account of the development of inner and oral speech. By seeing the distinctions between the way in which we learn oral and written

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speech, we can more clearly see the needs of student writers. The dissimilarity between the factors influential in the acquisition and development of oral and written language skills is profound, suggesting that composition theorists should reassess current pedagogy in light of Vygotsky's insights. Although widely cited as one whose work supports currently held views on the composing process, much of what Vygotsky has to contribute has not been absorbed into writing theory.

Development of Oral Speech

Vygotsky stresses that speech is primarily a means of social contact that develops in a highly motivating environment. In describing the acquisition of oral speech he states that "The child feels the need for words and, through his [or her] questions tries to learn the signs attached to objects" (Vygotsky, Thought 43, emphasis added). The acquisition and development of oral speech, Vygotsky reveals, is due to its function: it serves real and immediate needs. Although Vygotsky does not directly comment on the home environment in which language is learned, the nature of that environment is clearly implied by contrast in his description of the development of writing skills. However, many modern researchers do describe the home learning environment in terms congruent with Vygotsky's assessment.

One of these researchers, Margaret Martlew states that "Spoken language is acquired in a highly motivated social context. . . and children find it a very effective way of

achieving communicative goals" (Margaret Martlew, "Problems and Difficulties," 298). Children's earliest skills with language grow out of their social interaction with family members. The learning atmosphere in the home is generally a highly motivational one in which children are challenged to understand and reproduce spoken words. Peter Elbow echoes Vygotsky's description of the learning environment:

> We learn speech as infants--from parents who love us and naturally reward us for speaking at all. Our first audience works overtime to hear the faintest intention in our every utterance, no matter how hidden or garbled that meaning may be. (Elbow, "The Shifting Relationship between Speech and Writing" 285)

Children quickly learn that language serves a practical purpose: it is a medium through which they can satisfy their needs and explore their environment.

Children acquire oral speech in a largely unconscious manner. In just a few years, children gain the ability to use a great variety of elements that are called forth by oral speech. They rapidly build a vocabulary, they develop a basic command of sentence structure, and they gain an ability to work with the logic of grammar -- all without the benefit of formal education. Although parents may correct a child's errors in usage, the acquisition of oral speech is largely unconscious.

Oral speech develops organically in a motivationally

charged, dynamic situation. Its rapid acquisition is largely due to its function: it serves clear and immediate needs. Oral speech continues to develop because the motivation for its use remains constant. The purpose of speech changes from moment to moment, but it is always satisfying immediate needs.

Written Language: Acquisition and Development

While oral speech develops in an organic manner -- which is to say without formal instruction or concentrated effort -- written language skills require formal training, concentration, and effort. Vygotsky, aware of this disparity, begins his discussion of written language by asking, "Why does writing come so hard to the schoolchild that at certain periods there is a lag of as much as six or eight years between his 'linguistic age' in speaking and in writing?" (Thought 98). He concludes that "Written speech is a separate linguistic function, differing from oral speech in both structure and mode of functioning," adding that "Even its minimal development requires a high level of abstraction" (Vygotsky, Thought 98).

In order to illustrate the difficulty that written speech presents to the child, Vygotsky describes the adjustments any young student must make:

> In learning to write, the child must disengage himself from the sensory aspect of speech and replace words by the image of words. Speech that is merely imagined and

> that requires symbolization of the sound image in written signs (i.e., a second degree of symbolization) naturally must be as much harder than oral speech for the child as algebra is harder than arithmetic. (Thought 99)

Even though children possess a substantial vocabulary and basic knowledge of grammatical structure, they have difficulty with written speech because it requires mastery of technical skills unrelated to oral skills. In both the acquisition and use of oral speech, Vygotsky notes that meaning and social communication are primary; in the early development of writing skills, however, technical mastery is paramount. Writing requires the child to concentrate on aspects of communication that demand little or no attention in oral speech. Writing lacks an immediate interlocutor and is "addressed to an absent or imaginary person or to no one in particular -- a situation new and strange to the child" (Vygotsky, Thought 99). In contrast to the stimulus provided by the situation in which oral speech takes place, Vygotsky tells us that

> The motives for writing are more abstract, more intellectualized, further removed from immediate needs. In written speech, we are obliged to create the situation, to represent it to ourselves. This demands detachment from the actual situation. (Vygotsky, Thought 99)

In order to write, children must face the difficult task of creating a rhetorical situation. Vygotsky concludes that "it is the abstract quality of written language that is the main stumbling block" for children as they learn writing skills (Thought 99).

Vygotsky's question, "Why does writing come so hard to the schoolchild" is partially answered by his statements on the abstract qualities of written speech. Vygotsky considers writing to be a difficult skill to acquire because it requires 1) unique technical elements; 2) abstract thought (imagined words, imagined audience); 3) deliberate and conscious effort; 4) a more complete linguistic structure than inner and oral speech; and 5) a syntax opposite that of inner speech on which its production depends. By way of summary, Vygotsky adds, "The discrepancy [between oral and written abilities] is caused by the child's proficiency in spontaneous, unconscious activity and his lack of skill in abstract, deliberate activity" (Thought 100). Although the distinct demands of written language would seem to stem from the intrinsic requirements of its lexicographical elements, it would be more accurate to attribute these distinctions, not to forms, but to function.

Vygotsky underscores the abstract quality of written language as the primary obstacle in acquisition. Why does the abstract nature of written speech present such a formidable obstacle when the immense requirements for oral speech are so quickly overcome? Vygotsky answers this by suggesting that there

is not sufficient motivation to compel children to overcome the difficulties of writing. "Our studies show," he writes, "that [children have] little motivation to learn writing when we begin to teach it. [They feel] no need for it and [have] only a vague idea of its usefulness" (Thought 99).

Vygotsky indicates that motivation is highly important in the development of oral skills, but what, we must ask, prompts the acquisition and use of written language? Without the need for written social contact with family members, without the need to express immediate needs through written discourse, what motives exist for the acquisition of writing skills? Without the need for purposeful written communication on a daily basis, what impels people to engage in writing? And finally, what in our social activities cause us to opt for written, rather than oral speech? We may concluded from Vygotsky's analysis that little or no motivation exists that would stimulate children to overcome the difficulties of writing. As children grow, and their range of social contact expands, oral speech remains the most functional means of communication.

Arguably, children's early schooling provides the motivation to learn written language. On the surface it would appear that many of the motivational factors found in the acquisition and use of oral speech are present in the classroom situation. The classroom generally has a nurturing environment like the home. The teacher provides the motivation for writing. Writing is addressed to an instructor, who functions as an immediate audience and not an imaginary, distant one. This, however, is

seldom the case.

The conditions that exist in the classroom are very different from those in the home. Writing is not spontaneously prompted by real needs, but by a teacher interested in assessing correctness. Teachers, especially in elementary and secondary schools, tend to focus on spelling, grammar, and mechanics. Rather than a concern for meaning and communication, American schooling since the turn of the century has concerned itself technical correctness. The responses that children do receive from their instructors is delayed during the grading process, and thus it is less immediate. Teachers, therefore, generally do not serve as real audiences, because they tend to be correctors rather than interlocutors.

Teachers' roles in written communication is so artificial that far from serving as real audiences, they serve as substitutes for vaguely defined audiences. The reasons for addressing such an audience, as Vygotsky suggests, must be unclear to young students. If the motives for written language are not being provided by the classroom context, then it is unlikely that children are receiving the stimulation that would make writing a purposeful, desirable activity that fulfills immediate needs.

Insufficient motivation hinders not only the initial acquisition of written language skills but also their continued development. Studies by Walter Loban [1] indicate that written

1. Loban is a researcher who studied the development of oral and written language skills in children.

language skills continue to be less developed than oral skills for many years. Loban's examination shows that written speech is structurally less elaborate than oral speech until the eighth grade. Because written speech frequently requires greater elaboration to effectively communicate one's ideas, it cannot be said that students' writing skills have overtaken their oral skills at that time, nor can it be said that they have even reached parity. Writing skills tend to lag behind speaking skills because the motives for engaging in written communication remain essentially the same. Except for the classroom, little need for writing exists and thus little need to engage in writing activities. And as Vygotsky and other theorists suggest, there may be little to motivate students in the classroom.

Vygotsky's discussion suggests that we should examine our teaching methods to compare an assignments relative artificiality and abstractness with its purposefulness and clarity. In contrast to traditional methods of teaching writing that focused on correctness, current writing theory centers around the process of writing. This focus is on the stages that writers move through: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. Despite close to thirty years of theoretical preoccupation with "invention," writing instruction continues to stress the technical aspects of writing. The pedagogic emphasis on process, the parts of the process, and the procedures enacted within those parts, take precedence over the concern for meaningful communication. In modern pedagogy, meaning has taken a back seat

to a concern for replicating those processes that produce meaning. A state exists today in which purposeful invention strategies function to aid in students' discovery process. Richard Young states that these procedures often "function merely as retrieval procedures providing the student with something anything to say ("Invention: A Topographical Survey 26, emphasis added). The implication is that students have little to say that they want to communicate in a written discourse. When these procedures merely function to help students find suitable and appropriate topics for essays, then meaning and communication have clearly been relegated to a subordinate status.

Process-oriented theory presents writing as a series of compartmentalized activities. The current emphasis in teaching is on invention procedures which are by and large formulaic, technical operations. Although these procedures can be conveyed to students in a variety of ways, heuristic activities associated with invention demand time, energy, and a pupil's full attention. These activities would seem to direct students' attention toward technical activities and away from the communicative aspects of writing. It is likely that these activities would thus appear abstract and lacking in purpose.

Vygotsky has made it clear that language activities that do not directly and immediately perform a communicative function are more likely to cause the student to become uncertain about the purpose of the activity. Rather than asking how we write -- what techniques and procedures writers engage in -- we should be asking why we write. What stimulates one to write? Why do

writers choose writing as their means of communication?

A Learner Based Pedagogy

Though Vygotsky's recommendations are intended strictly for elementary education, his statements are broad enough to be applicable to all writing classrooms. He makes several general statements on how writing should be taught, two of which can be directly applied to the exigencies of composition teaching. One of Vygotsky's concerns is that "writing must be [made] 'relevant to life' -- in the same way that we require a 'relevant' arithmetic" (Mind 118). By revealing how we learn language skills, Vygotsky shows us ways to develop a pedagogy focused on the needs of the student as a language learner.

Writing must be emphasized as a real-life skill, Vygotsky insists, in order to stress its role in our cultural life. Certainly central to his thoughts on education was his belief that "writing be taught naturally" (Vygotsky, Mind 118). Vygotsky's mandate is that "writing should be 'cultivated' rather than 'imposed'" (Mind 118). It is Vygotsky's conviction that if sufficient motivation exists in the learning environment, then students will, to a great extent, learn of their own volition.

The implication -- and perhaps it is a frightening one -- that is apparent in a pedagogy based on Vygotsky's ideas is that teachers must bear much of the responsibility for motivating their students. A pedagogy based on how students learn will be difficult to implement because although procedures are easy to teach, purpose is not. At the core of a Vygotsky-based pedagogy

is the idea that teachers should create a situation in which students are motivated to learn and motivated to write. Students who are motivated to write, who have a purpose in writing, will invent their own procedures or call upon the procedures they have absorbed. At bottom, this approach to writing instruction would not teach writing as such, but would instead stimulate its use, purposefully and consistently.

We may draw several conclusions from Vygotsky's writings which are at once promising and problematic. If we agree that the development of writing skills is complicated and protracted by writing's abstract purposes and technical requirements, then we must ask how these may be overcome. Young writers must have a need to master these aspects of writing so that they are seen as the means and not the focus of written discourse. One way that this can be accomplished is if writing is presented as a purposeful, communicative activity. The role of pedagogues, then, is not to create formulas and procedures, but is instead to create a situation in which a real communicative act can occur. This Sisyphean boulder is not one that can be easily rolled uphill.

This boulder, however, is a trivial pebble when viewed in relationship to another obstacle implicit in Vygotsky's writings. If communication is primarily social, and if oral speech serves us best in the vast majority of social contact, then what social and cultural motivation exists for writing? If writing serves such a limited function in our world -- why write? Why should

such an emphasis be placed on a skill that serves little social purpose? Restructuring our society so that writing serves an important and necessary function is an impossibility. Our technological society, by its natural growth, has limited the possible need for written communication. Although written communication was essential one-hundred years ago, the telephone, for example, has greatly reduced the need for written communication.

Unless we desire to become specialists in a field that requires written discourse, what need have we to write? We have the artificial need created by academia. We sometimes have the need to write letters, notes, or business reports (but we have specialists for the latter). Some would suggest -- and I with them -- that writing serves as a means of discovery. Cannot writing serve -- as egocentric speech serves the child -- to aid our understanding of our actions and our inner world? Just as oral speech assists our understanding of the world around us, written speech promotes an understanding of both the inner and outer world. Using writing to this end, however, is not socially or culturally inspired. It is personal. The motivation to engage in such an activity comes from the individual.

It may be impossible to create the highly motivating environment for writing that is suggested by Vygotsky, because it would require that our social and cultural environment be one which necessitates the use of writing. In uncovering the nature and the function of writing, Vygotsky has revealed why there is a general reluctance to engage in writing activities. Although

Vygotsky certainly realized the difficulty in promoting real and purposeful writing, there is no pessimism in his writing. Our sociocultural and technical development may lead to a time when written discourse and communication are raised to a level of importance. The FAX machine is one such example. Written communication moves much faster to the audience. Responses are more immediate and thus the purpose for engaging in this activity is clearer. The French Minitel system (a telecommunication system that connects communicators through written language) is also a technological development that elevates the role writing to immediate, purposeful communication. This system makes the function of writing clearly apparent. In addition, it makes the artistic pleasure of writing more immediate. People using the system frequently use "handles" or fictitious names. Through their continued joining with the network of others, they create personas through writing. Writing becomes a creative, pleasurable, and functional activity.

Until meaningful forms of social written communication are wide spread and socially entrenched, we must strive to approximate a nurturing environment for the act of writing. Vygotsky envisioned a pedagogic approach to the teaching of writing based on our understanding of why language skills are learned and used. Understanding why we acquire and develop language skills is fundamental to the creation of a pedagogy that is highly motivating to students. The degree to which students' writing abilities improve is directly related to the amount of motivation that they have to develop their written language skills.

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